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Normative Political Theory

Abstract: Normative political theory was developed in ancient Greece and provided the foundations for political research. Its role was never questioned until the rise of logical positivism and empirical social science with its claims to be truly scientific' that is, value neutral. The article starts with a short overview of this controversy and provides an analysis of the nature of normative theorizing, the structure of a normative argument and the role of normative political theory. The last section focuses on the problematic relationship between empirical and normative research. It is argued that political philosophy can be practical, but before it becomes oriented towards practical goals, it should deal with purely deductive fact-insensitive principles.

Keywords: normative theory, normativity, political philosophy, political science, logical positivism

'[...] it is necessary to appreciate that there are two aspects to political theory, traditionally conceived. It involves the analysis of what is politically feasible on the one hand and of what is desirable on the other.'

C. Kukathas, P. Pettit, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Its Critics*
(Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, pp. 1–2).

Political science combines the insights and approaches of both the humanities and the social sciences. Although today its methods might be predominantly empirical, the very foundations of political science have a normative character and pertain to the key question in political philosophy: what is a good political order? The philosophical insights into the nature of politics laid the foundations for political theories that have developed since the ancient Greek tradition. Several decades ago, however, the role of these philosophical insights, and more broadly, the role of a normative theory of politics, became questionable or questioned by numerous political scientists who preferred a neutral empirical approach to the study of politics. It was evident that normative political theory needed some sort of justification and explanation as to what its role and pur-

pose in such disciplines as political science or international relations might be. This article will attempt to address this very question. The first introductory section brings a short analysis of the debate on the problematic nature of normative political theory or political philosophy. The second part provides an analysis of the nature of normative theorizing about politics, its role – which is often regarded as foundational – and the structure of a normative argument. And the final part focuses on the questions of the relationship between empirical research and normative theory.

Introduction

There are two different intellectual paradigms in political science: a normative approach and a ‘positive’ approach. The ‘positive’ paradigm treats the scientific study of politics as associated with a value neutral approach to the subject (Gerring, Yesnowitz, 2006, p. 101) and argues that theory can be applied only to what is, not to what ought to be. Neopositivists such as Lucien Levy Bruhl claimed that science cannot be a science in so far as it is normative. At the advent of the behavioural turn in political science Robert Dahl stated:

The empirical political scientist is concerned with what is [...] not with what ought to be [...]. The behaviorally minded student of politics is prepared to describe values as empirical data; but, qua ‘scientist’ he seeks to avoid prescription or inquiry into the grounds on which judgments of value can properly be made (Dahl, 1961, pp. 770–771).

And Peter Laslett in his introduction to *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (1956) famously declared that ‘political philosophy is dead’ at least ‘for the moment’. Its death was largely a consequence of the rise of logical positivism that reflected a deep faith in scientific understanding and suggested that propositions that are not empirically verifiable are simply meaningless. Logical empiricists supported the view that political science, like natural science, must dispassionately study facts for science can only be concerned with ‘what has been, is, or will be, regardless of the “oughts” of the situation’ (van Dyke, 1960, p. 192). Such a view excluded political philosophy as ‘alleged’ knowledge of the normative. A number of political scientists declared that their work was concerned with the empirical propositions of political science and not with ‘the value judgments of political doctrine’ (Lasswell, 1951, p. xiii).

However, since then a number of scholars not only have been engaged in doing normative theory (notably many political philosophers such as Mi-

chael Oakeshott, Leo Strauss or Hannah Arendt), but have also expressed dissatisfaction with 'the empiricist separation of normative (advocacy-oriented) and empirical (explanation-oriented) approaches' (Shapiro, 1981, p. 5). After the publication of John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, political philosophy and more broadly normative political theory has gone from strength to strength to become recognized again as a valuable or even necessary method of research in political science. This recognition came with the agreement that values can be seen as the substance of political systems and political structures for they play the role of mediators in both prescriptive and descriptive accounts of politics.

In 1976 Charles Taylor published a celebrated article 'Neutrality in Political Science' in which he argued, against the prevailing intellectual current at the time, that the findings of political science are not and will never be value-free: 'a given explanatory framework secretes a notion of good, and a set of valuations, which cannot be done away with – though they can be overridden – unless we do away with the framework'. Using several examples, including Seymour Lipset's analysis of democracy in his *Political Man*, he explains that empirical theories or supposedly pure assumptions about facts have normative consequences expressed in statements about what is good or desirable in politics.¹ It thus proves that a 'connection between factual base and valuation is built in, as it were, to the conceptual structure' (Taylor, 1994, p. 559). When establishing a framework of political analysis, the range of values that can be adopted must necessarily be limited, and thus value orientation cannot be done away with completely. Consequently, 'to the extent that political science cannot dispense with theory, with the search for a framework, to that extent it cannot stop developing normative theory' (Taylor, 1994, p. 569).

This position undermines the philosophical claim of neutrality in political science, stating that the separation of facts and values is possible. Although Taylor's position could not solve the controversy once and forever, it paved the way for critical reassessment of arguments against normative theorizing in politics. Values are central phenomena in political science and international relations while facts and values are inseparable characteristics of the world as it is comprehended by humans. The argument that real political problems can only be understood in terms of objective material interests and empirically observable facts needs to be dismissed as providing an inadequate account of political

¹ Taylor brings this illuminating quotation from Lipset: 'A basic premise of this book is that democracy is not only or even primarily a means through which different groups can attain their ends or seek the good society; it is the good society itself in operation. Only the give-and-take of a free society's internal struggles offers some guarantee that the products of the society will not accumulate in the hands of a few power-holders' (Lipset, 1994, p. 403).

inquiry, which cannot be completely separated from normative structures. This is especially true in the discipline of international relations where institutional facts are often not clearly settled, and reliance on a normative framework becomes necessary. Consequently, any methodology in political science and international relations must be 'sensitive to the normative character of both subject and method (implicating theory), such that the traditional distinction between 'is' and 'ought' gives way to an understanding of their intimate relationship' (Dyer, 1997, p. 28). If we assumed that only facts and not values or principles can be a valid subject of the scientific inquiry we would have to sacrifice the whole critical social and political theory which has a normative dimension, and this very dimension distinguishes it from positivistic sociology. The findings of political science are not value-free; they lend support to some values and undermine others.

Defining normative theory and its role

Normative political theory is as old as reflection about politics and we can easily regard Plato and Aristotle as its founders. There are several aspects of their philosophical reflection of politics (or practical philosophy) which build up a normative theory: there is no separation between ethics and politics (thus between 'ought' and 'is', they are mutually dependent), the nature of political theorizing is both descriptive (e.g. Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*) and prescriptive (Plato's *The Republic* and *The Laws*, Aristotle's *Politics*), politics has a teleological character and as an activity is concerned with *telos*, which is primarily defined as the good life of the political community. Classical political theory was a predecessor of political science and for many centuries political theorizing had had mainly a normative character, but it was often a response to a certain empirical context. For instance, Jean Bodin's concept of sovereignty was developed during his service to the French monarchy and in a way justified the already developing system of governing. It was not, however, presented as a description of empirical phenomena, but as a normative theory. In the concept of sovereignty Bodin found a principle upon which a political order should be based. Thus it can be said that 'political theories are shaped by the important cultural, intellectual, and political currents of their time and place, and it is natural to think of these currents as, in a sense, the "foundations" of a political theory' (Moon, 2015, p. 1342).

This line of reasoning about the nature of political theory was addressed by Quentin Skinner in his two-volume *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), and in other writings. He argues that political theorizing is not, and cannot be, an effort to answer perennial questions of political life, but is itself a form

of political activity, in which one draws on the cultural elements available in one's society to advance and legitimate a position in ongoing controversies. Thus in order to understand what the authors of political texts were 'doing in writing them' (Skinner, 1978, xiii), we must recover 'the normative vocabulary' of the time within which an author's ideas – even, or especially, when they extend or revise that vocabulary – are necessarily expressed. The study of political thought, in this view, must not only be contextual, but must be a 'history of ideologies' – in the sense of 'discourses of legitimation' (Skinner, 2006, p. 242, n. 5). In *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, for example, Skinner investigates 'the acquisition of the concept of the sovereign state, together with the corresponding idea that individual subjects are endowed with natural rights within and potentially against the state' (Skinner, 2006, p. 237).

Our primary concern here, however, is not whether we accept the contextualist reading of political philosophy or not. The key question for our analysis concerns the type of theory that political philosophy involves. In general, a positive social theory attempts to explain how the social world works in a value-free way, while a normative theory provides a value-based view about what the social world ought to be like or how it ought to work. The former describes and examines the existing social, political and economic structures while the latter proposes goals and standards that should be achieved, or at least are desirable even if they cannot be achieved at the moment. Political theories provide a set of concepts or propositions that explain political phenomena on the one hand and, on the other, normative principles for ordering political communities. These principles are often treated as having universal validity. Each political community can function on the basis of certain common standards shared by its members. A *descriptive* social or political theory simply identifies and examines those standards whereas a *normative* theory formulates statements as to what standards a political community *ought* to follow or be based upon.

Normative theory is concerned with norms or normative principles. A normative principle can be defined as 'a general directive that tells agents what (they ought, or ought not) to do' (Cohen, 2003, p. 211). All our concepts cannot simply 'describe' reality; they also provide meaning to the social world of facts, values, norms, patterns, standards. Therefore apart from descriptive arguments formulated by empirically minded political scientists there are also evaluative or prescriptive arguments formulated by theorists who are concerned with justification of norms. Broadly conceived norms are regularities of certain phenomena. In the social and political context, norms can be understood descriptively as standards of behaviour of social and political action, or prescriptively as reasons which dictate a certain choice of action. In ethics norms mean moral standards. A normative theory tries to determine what standards *ought* to be follo-

wed in a political community (domestic or international). Normative statements refer to an ideal standard or model and this reference may involve *a priori* concepts that establish standards by which judgments can be made. Norms determine the value of social phenomena and are the major point of reference in the process of judging social phenomena as desirable or undesirable. Because of the structure of our reasoning it can be suggested that 'All our concepts have normative dimension [...] once we look at the world as agents we cannot reach a pure non-normative core; this is part of the thorough unity of the world wrought out by bridging implications' (Castañeda, 1988, p. 16). Normativity allows for questioning the world we experience in order to render judgment on it so that we can say what measures are not being met, what standards are being overlooked. This is possible because of the clear autonomy of 'what ought to be' from 'what is' (Marti-Huang, 1987, p. 152) although the relationship of the two dimensions will always be a matter of controversy.

Normative theory, as any other theory, needs to address the question: what is a valid subject of scientific inquiry? According to the common distinction that has been made since at least the 1950s (e.g. in Bernard, 1950, p. 481) scientific social theory can be validated by reference to actual facts by ordinary inductive methods. Normative theory, however, since it does not refer to what actually exists but to what ought to exist, needs to be validated in a different way, by reference to philosophical postulates, or in other words the postulates of practical reason (e.g. Kantian ethics), or by reference to some ontological and epistemological assumptions about the social and political world (e.g. certain objective standards discoverable through reason, such as natural rights) or other postulates which evaluate what is by applying some objective norms that cannot be verified empirically. Although this objectivity can always be contingent, it belongs to the very structure of a normative argument which extrapolates empirical phenomena to formulate value-oriented statements regarding the desirable structure of these phenomena, their justification and evaluation against a certain ideal standard. For example, formulating substantive features of a democratic order, a normative democratic theory extrapolates from a purely descriptive account of democratic mechanisms and institutions. We can call this aspect of the normative argument a prescriptive function. Normative democratic theory can also focus on the justification of institutional democratic structures (e.g. constitutionalism), providing reasons and not factual proofs. This can be called a justificatory function of a normative theory. Finally, normative democratic theory can evaluate democratic structures against certain normative standards (e.g. substantive democratic norms) and this can be called an evaluative function. It can also play a more modest yet very important role of clarifying arguments and weighting values involved in political choices (Bauböck, 2008, p. 40).

Another important aspect of a normative political theory is its function. It can be argued that normative social and political theory 'preserves the intentions of practical philosophy to rationally articulate a more adequate form of human existence and to enlighten them in its attainment' (Benhabib, 1986, p. 5). The term 'normative' does not imply only something that 'ought to be', but refers to norms and their centrality in the political realm. Normative theory enables not only a firm grounding and understanding of existing norms, but also a critique of given norms and their sources. Normative analysis provides critical assessment of the assumptions and philosophical foundations of political action and allows for the overcoming of the separation between politics and ethics. The changing nature of the political creates much room for philosophical reflection on politics (Krauz-Mozer, 2011, p. 43) and especially on such issues as just war, responsibility for the environment, gender equality or the rights of the most disadvantaged. In light of critical normative theory that allows for critical reflection on the foundations of political science or international relations, these foundations can be viewed as ultimately contextual or contingent and not absolute.

Klaus von Beyme argues that it is not possible to fully determine (identify) the philosophical foundations of contemporary normative theories (formulated after the Second World War). They range from Thomism through conservative skepticism and they no longer have religious foundations (Beyme, 2007, p. 40). However, some common features of normative theories in the 20th century can be identified: 1. A return to Aristotle and more broadly classical political philosophy (Arendt, Pangle, Voegelin, Strauss); 2. Interest in the history of political ideas; 3. A clear ontological foundation that allows for objective truth; 4. In methodology, where scepticism towards abstract rational models and system theories prevails, some refer to *topoi* as a tool of formulating hypotheses (Beyme, 2007, pp. 40–43). Beyme argues that normative theory is necessary in order to reduce irrationalism in statements of what 'ought' to be (Beyme, 2007, p. 46) and acknowledges the role of political philosophy, not only in hypotheses building, but also in the final stage of political inquiry that involves conclusions on political action.

Normative theory can be prescriptive (referring to deontic modality) or descriptive (referring to the actual circumstance of that modality). This double meaning gives normative theory a wide range of application as it can be employed to address particular practices which refer to norms (as desirable) or it can be used to address the way in which norms exist, function, and evolve.

A normative approach to the concept of the political focuses on a positive evaluation of the meaning of a valuable political order whereas a critical approach is meant to uncover injustice, tensions and contradictions of social stru-

ctures (Minker, 2015, p. 59). Its ethical dimension, which became the source of criticism for many empirically-minded scholars, allows for an accommodation of fact-value distinction. It comes with the acknowledgment that our political world is not only the world of facts, but also of values and value judgments. We would not be able to make sense of social facts without the ability to express meaningful statements as to what benefits human flourishing and well-being. One of the key institutions in today's international relations, deeply embodied in the constitutions of most states, is the institution of human rights and their protection. Its justification can hardly be presented without a normative political theory that prescribes the values which any decent (to use Rawls' term) political community must observe. This minimal standard or goal since the end of the Second World War has been defined as protection of basic human rights in the light of the UN 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The language of natural human rights was first used by political philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and deeply influenced the two very first documents that invoke rights as fundamental constitutional principles, the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Any descriptive or empirical theory of politics can only tell us how well basic human rights are respected in a given political context, but it cannot tell us why they should be protected in the first place.

The relationship between empirical research and normative theory

The common distinction in political science suggests that 'one either studies "democracy" or empirical instances of democracy, but not both' (Gerring, Yesnowitz, 2006, p. 103). Theorists engage in a rigorous, philosophically informed normative study while empiricists engage in a rigorous, methodologically informed empirical study. But does that mean that political philosophy and political research should be treated as separate entities? Or perhaps there is room for interaction between the two. In recent decades an interesting debate has been concerned with the very scope and orientation of normative political theory and its method. In particular, the debate has paid attention to the question of the proper 'place of empirical inquiry within the repertoire of the professional political theorist' (Stears, 2005, p. 325) asking how far a political theorist should be sensitive to facts and attentive to the contexts and the feasibility of implementation with regard to prescriptive models. The key question between the two camps is this: must principles of justice be practical? (Weinberg, 2013, p. 331). Some scholars argue that normative theory must be closely linked with empirical realities and

consider non-ideal structures that hinder the implementation of ideals in the real world (Farrelly, 2007; Dupré, 2001).

John Gerring and Joshua Yesnowitz have summarised this position, stating that “Empirical study in the social sciences is meaningless if it has no normative import’ while ‘a normative argument without empirical support may be rhetorically persuasive or logically persuasive, but it will not have demonstrated anything about the world out there” (Gerring, Yesnowitz, 2006, p. 133). On this reading good social science must integrate both elements. Similarly, Ronald Beiner argues that ‘moral political commitments’ must be based on our knowledge of what best satisfies worthy human ends or human longings (Beiner, 2016, p. 312). Rawls’s term ‘realistic utopia’ captures the view that normative political theory (political philosophy in his case) is concerned with both ideals and practicality (Rawls, 2001). Addressing the question of the practicality of political philosophy, Justine Weinberg (2013, p. 330) argues that as such it has ‘two masters: knowledge and action.’ It is not only supposed to tell us what is true about justice, rights or authority, but also what to do in order to promote the desirable standards as prescribed by these principles. This understanding of political philosophy conflates its very normative nature and pushes it too far in the empirical direction. Its limited validity can be seen in John Gray’s claim that ethics must be an empirical field freed from any *a priori* truths (Gray, 2000, p. 35). He seems to support this claim with his conviction that the only ethical position that can be defended is value pluralism which is a descriptive and not a normative theory. The incommensurability of values leaves us without any criterion or standard to judge and evaluate moral claims (Gray, 2000, p. 37).

Other political theorists have expressed certain reservations when it comes to the ‘practicality’ of a normative theory. Particularly illuminating seems to be Gerald Cohen’s refutation of constructivist accounts of justice which assume that principles must be at least to some extent affirmed by and grounded in facts (Cohen, 2003). Such position according to Cohen can be found in Rawls when he states that ‘Conceptions of justice must be justified by the conditions of our life as we know it or not at all’ (Rawls, 1999, p. 398). The main argument against such a position is the existence of ‘fact-insensitive normative principles’; in other words, principles that are not grounded in facts, such as statements about human beings, their rationality etc. (Cohen, 2003, p. 222). In any argument that involves normative principles we reach the stage at which there cannot be facts supporting our principles; they are either self-evident (e.g. the dignity of a human being) or must be taken for granted as true (e.g. Locke’s concept of the inalienable rights of the individual). Therefore ‘affirmations of fact-insensitive principle are logically prior to affirmations of principle that are made when factual information is brought to bear’ (Cohen, 2003, p. 227). Justification of principles in its stron-

gest form is often deductive which means that in order to justify a principle (e.g. human rights) a more general, higher-level principle or norm is provided from which the first can be deducted (e.g. human dignity or human nature, or the categorical imperative), sometimes along with certain generalizations (Moon, 2015). If these higher-level principles or first premises of a normative theory are supposed to provide justification they must be treated as self-evident, absolute, universal and invariant. This raises obvious problems often noted by critics of any foundationalism as to the recognition of the non-arbitrary nature of such principles. An interesting response to this problem can be found in John Stewart Mill and his attempt to justify the greatest happiness principle or the principle of utility. Mill asserted that 'Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof' (Mill, 2003, p. 12). It is our intellect that treats some considerations as self-evident and therefore worth upholding or not.

The fact that at least a certain part of a normative political theory cannot have any obvious reference to empirical phenomena reflects the very nature of normative theorizing and not its problems. And if indeed many works in political theory 'have ignored the findings of mainstream political scholars who strive to uncover the salient facts of political life, fleeting as those may be' (Ricci, 1984, p. 321), this should not be taken as an argument against normative political theory.

Normative political theory and empirical political studies do not need to be put in two separate boxes and treated as competing approaches. As many studies suggest there is a need for both approaches in political science and their dialogue can increase our understanding of politics (Morrell, 1999, p. 293). Normative theory can guide empirical research while empirical research can have positive impact on normative theory (Bauböck, 2008, p. 40). The view prevailing in the 1960s and 1970s that political theory has turned away from much political science and there is no compromise between the two (Kateb, 1977, p. 136) no longer stands. Instead, more and more political theories benefit from empirical research that explores the ways politics functions in the real world while empirical research needs some kind of guidance when it comes to important questions, and justification. So, for instance, empirical studies of multiculturalism are often done in light of certain normative standards as to what the desirable model of coexistence between various cultural groups should be; they can test the applicability of such models and formulate hypotheses upon what does or does not function empirically and why. Normative philosophical accounts of multiculturalism proved quite influential in the 1990s, shaping debates on the subject not only in academia, but also in public life. As Will Kymlicka reminds us, Charles Taylor's essay "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition" (1992) was translated into numerous languages and cited in discussions of multiculturalism not only in Paris or Tokyo, but also in the highlands of Bolivia (Kymlicka,

2010, p. 257). Major studies on the subject undertaken in the last two decades by Kymlicka are a good example of a dialogue between the two approaches. Normative theories of multiculturalism reflect certain facts and inform certain policies; this allows empirical researchers who deal with multicultural policies to use them. These policies cannot be seen as completely detached from certain moral standards which need to be delineated in the first place.

Another example is participatory democratic theory which starts with normative assumptions as to the value of active civic participation in a democratic order, and can be further developed through empirical research that aims to explore the conditions that make such participation a viable option for citizens (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2008). In this sense, the principles of political philosophy should be practical, which means that it should be able to tell us what needs to be done in order to make some principles a viable option. For example, what needs to be done or what conditions or opportunities need to be in place to make political participation a desirable goal for citizens. Thus theorists of participatory democracy might want to focus not only on opportunities for participation, but also on a more practical question of how those opportunities ought to be institutionalized (Morrell, 1999, p. 294).

Not all of political philosophy or normative theory in international relations will have this practical goal. First of all there are some limits as to what normative theory may offer in terms of practical solutions (as they cannot be tested empirically in a laboratory). And secondly, normative theory shall retain its prescriptive, justificatory and evaluative aspects as valuable in themselves no matter what its practical side might be.

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